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Commonwealth Issues Drought Advisory

Stepped-Up Monitoring of Water Resources Covers Four Regions of the Bay State

BOSTON, MA – Following two months of unusually dry weather in most of the state, the Massachusetts Drought Management Task Force has issued a Drought Advisory in four of the Commonwealth's six water resources management regions. The Advisory covers all of Massachusetts except for Cape Cod and the Islands and Berkshire County, and calls on state, regional and local water officials to be vigilant, especially concerning fire danger and water supply for firefighting.

Issuance of the Drought Advisory came at the Wednesday, October 10th meeting of the Task Force at the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) headquarters in Framingham. The second of five levels of drought conditions outlined in the Massachusetts Drought Management Plan (Normal, Advisory, Watch, Warning and Emergency), an Advisory indicates a level of dry conditions that warrants closer tracking by agencies at all levels of government. Of particular concern is fire danger in the coming weeks, when fallen leaves will provide abundant fuel and dry soil conditions can allow fire to burn deep and spread rapidly to large areas.

Although fall and winter months are not peak water use periods, they are typically the time when reservoirs and groundwater are recharged. Continued dry weather could lead to more serious drought conditions when warmer weather and increased water use resume in the spring.

Task Force officials noted that, while some smaller reservoir systems in Drought Advisory areas are low for this time of year, the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) supply system is well within normal operating range. Some other public water suppliers have issued conservation measures in response to the dry conditions. While the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) and its agencies encourage people to conserve water as a matter of good practice, today's Drought Advisory does not require any additional conservation measures on the part of the public or water supply managers beyond those already in place. Citizens are asked to abide by water restrictions imposed by their public water supplier.

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The Drought Advisory requires the Drought Management Task Force to begin meeting on a regular basis to more closely assess conditions across the state, coordinate dissemination of information to the public, and help state, federal and local agencies coordinate any responses that may be needed in the future. The Task Force will meet monthly, with the next meeting in November.

The state's rainfall has declined steadily since July, with cumulative precipitation deficits of up to 4 inches below normal for the months of August and September. October rainfall to date is also below normal. Stream flow is extremely deficient in many areas of the state, even for this time of year when seasonally low stream flow is expected. Ground water levels have also declined, although these are slower to respond than stream flow to the rainfall deficit. So far this year, 78 municipalities have informed the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) that they have instituted outdoor water use restrictions to conserve water. Last year, DEP received notification of water bans from just 25 communities.

The Drought Advisory is based on thresholds contained in the Massachusetts Drought Management Plan, a blueprint developed by the Drought Task Force to guide state activities in response to droughts and extended periods of dry weather.

The Massachusetts Drought Management Task Force comprises representatives of MEMA, EOEEA, DEP, Department of Conservation and Recreation, Department of Fish and Game, Department of Agricultural Resources, Department of Public Health, MWRA, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Weather Service, Massachusetts Water Works Association, and the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards.

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) is the state agency responsible for coordinating federal, state, local, voluntary and private resources during emergencies and disasters in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. MEMA provides leadership to: develop plans for effective response to all hazards, disasters or threats; train emergency personnel to protect the public; provide information to the citizenry; and assist individuals, families, businesses and communities to mitigate against, prepare for, and respond to and recover from emergencies, both natural and man made. For additional information about MEMA go to the MEMA website at www.mass.gov/mema.